Oral Traditions of the Prophet Muḥammad:
A Formulaic Approach

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The oral traditions of the Prophet Muḥammad are found recorded in the *ḥadīth* literature of Islam. This material consists of many collections of anecdotes, reports, statements, and prescriptions on a variety of subjects, all containing the records of words and deeds attributed to the Prophet Muḥammad, to his Companions, and to other Muslims of the early Islamic period.[1] It is common knowledge that in this literature we have to do with material which was originally transmitted orally. Even though the *ḥadīth* texts now exist in books, they bear several marks of oral composition: unvarying style, frequent repetition of expressions, emphasis upon action rather than description, conversational tone, atomistic structure, and, above all, the use of formulas as "the means of expressing the themes," to borrow and apply to prose the words used by Albert B. Lord (1960:49) in his description of Yugoslav oral poetry.

In the case of other literature originally transmitted orally, such as the Biblical tradition, the oral testimonies underwent changes as they were put down in writing, since they were incorporated into large literary wholes to become parts of connected discourses or narratives (see Koch 1969:89). This was not the case with the *ḥadīth* of Islam. We can open any written collection and find there, on the part of the compiler or editor, a scrupulous concern to preserve the conventions of oral recitation. So the interest of a researcher is not so much to prove the orality of the material, but rather to show how an understanding of its oral nature helps to grasp the specific contribution of *ḥadīth* to various practical concerns of the Muslims, such as the interpretation of the Qur'ān and the fulfilling of the duties of private, social, and cultic life. *Ḥadīth* are religious texts, with all that the term signifies of serious purpose. The thousands of reports which

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[1] For a general introduction to the *ḥadīth* literature see the article "ḥadīth" in the *EI*. Other introductory books cited in the references: Goldziher 1971; Guillaume 1966; Siddiqi 1961. A few of the collections of *ḥadīth* have been translated into English, such as al-Bukhārī 1979 and Muslim 1971-75.

have been recorded also testify by their nature that they constituted, in their oral stage of development, a living tradition, a flexible and expanding recollection by the community. As they were told and retold, recited and learned, passed on and corroborated by other testimonies, they underwent a great deal of creative transformation. This immense body of texts is, then, of additional interest as an example of Arabic prose from the period of the early development of the Islamic civilization.

Each *ḥadīth* text can be divided into three parts: 1) the chain of transmission, 2) the introduction, or setting, and 3) the report in the form of saying, event, action, story, or recollection. The chain of transmission (*isnād*) is the authenticating device for each text, and, besides giving the names of guarantors, leading back in more or less unbroken continuity to the primary source of the information, it uses a technical vocabulary that indicates the manner of transmission from one link to another in the chain. The *isnād* is not our concern here.

The manuals of *ḥadīth* science describe only two divisions of a *ḥadīth* text, the *isnād* and the "body" (*matn*), or "theme(s), subject(s)." For this purpose of literary analysis we can single out a short introduction to every report, which, although traditionally included as a part of the *matn*, deserves to be treated separately in order to clarify the nature and significance of the report itself.

The Introductory Formula

The chain of transmission ends with the primary guarantor being cited as speaking, either directly or indirectly. Then follows a brief statement of the circumstantial setting for the report, as an introduction, providing a sense of plausibility for the report itself. The introduction is always given in terms of action, never in a purely descriptive manner. Usually it is clear where the setting ends and the report proper begins, but sometimes the setting is a part of the report itself. The following example, taken from the famous collection of al-Bukhārī, Ṣaḥīḥ, is given simply to show how the chain of transmission is linked to the rest of the *ḥadīth*:

> ᶜAbd Allāh ibn Yūsuf reported to us, saying, "Mālik informed us on the authority of Abū al-Zanād, who had it from Al-ᶜAraj, who had it in turn from Abū Hurayra, that the Messenger of God said: 'If one of you leads the people in prayer he should shorten it for the sake of any among them who are weak, ill or elderly. But when one of you prays alone he can take as long as he desires'." (*adhān*:62)

For the purpose of presenting evidence of the introduction feature in the texts, I have read rapidly through 2,285 *ḥadīth* from the collection

called *Ṣaḥīḥ*, by Muslim ibn al-Ḥajjāj (d. 875 A.D.), one of the two most respected compilations in the Islamic world. The *Ṣaḥīḥ* contains something over 7,000 reports in all, including many with multiple versions. The formula of introduction is almost always present. I call it a *structural formula*,[2] that is, a constantly repeated syntactical structure which always serves the same purpose. There is also a considerable amount of verbal uniformity in the use of the formula, but to enter into this aspect of the subject would require a discussion of themes, thus taking us beyond the scope of this study.[3]

The structural formula is the verb in its perfect form. In an Arabic sentence the verb normally comes in first place, so each *ḥadīth* is introduced by a verb, an action, setting the stage for the report to follow. In its simplest expression the verb stands alone, with its subject following, introducing the person or persons who figure in the report:

The Messenger of God *said. . ..*

qāla rasūl Allāh. . .. (*aymān*:10)[4]

Other verbs used include: "asked," "saw," "went out," "forbade," "commanded," and so forth. Although the setting is very often expressed simply by the verb alone, it can also contain complementary elements, such as prepositional phrases, adverbial complements, and direct objects, all depending directly upon the verb.

This simple and direct structural formula is capable of uniform expansion by virtue of the Arabic particles *fa-* ("and, so, then"), *thumma* ("then"), *idh* ("when"), *lammā* ("when"), and so on, all followed by the verb in the perfect. There is the formula using two verbs:

ᶜAlī *preached* and *said. . ..*

khaṭaba ᶜAlī fa-*qāla. . ..* (*ḥudūd*:7)

Other combinations of two verbs are: "came and said," "sat down and said," "entered and prayed," and so on.

The formula can also expand to three, four, or more verbs, all in the

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[2] Using the expression borrowed from Joseph A. Russo in Zwettler 1978:51.

[3] For a brief classification of the circumstantial settings of *ḥadīth* according to theme, see Stetter 1965.

[4] References to the *Ṣaḥīḥ* of Muslim give the name of the section (*kitāb*) and the number of the chapter (*bāb*) within the section.

perfect form. For example:

> When Abū Ṭālib *approached* death the Messenger
> of God *came* to him and *found*. . . and *said*

> lammā *ḥaḍarat* Abā Ṭālib al-wafāh *jā'ah* rasūl
> Allāh fa-*wajada* . . . fa-*qāla*. . .. (*īmān*:9)

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> My ears *heard* and my eyes *saw* when the
> Messenger of God *spoke* and *said*. . .

> *samiᶜat* udhunāya wa-*abṣarat* ᶜaynāya ḥīn
> *takallama* rasūl Allāh fa-*qāla*. . .. (*luqaṭa*:3)

Although most examples of the introductory formula have verbs in the perfect form, the requirements of announcing the setting sometimes call for the expression of other aspects of action. For example, the second verb may be in the imperfect:

> A man *came* to him *begging* for a hundred dirhams. . ..

> *atāh* rajul *yas'aluh* mi'at dirham. . . . (*aymān*:3)

One verbal form may be an active participle, as:

> I *entered* the mosque where the Messenger of
> God *was seated*. . ..

> dakhaltu al-masjid wa-rasūl Allāh *jālis* . . .. (*īmān*:72)

Formulas Used in the Reports

Turning to the saying, narration, or recollection which makes up the body of the *ḥadīth* text, we find three formulas according to the type of rhetoric that is used. Here we shall refer to some aspects of the thematic content of the literature, but only to point out correlation between theme and formula. For the evidence in this portion of the paper I am drawing upon my study (1970) of the *Musnad* of al-Ṭayālisī (d. 818 A.D.), one of the earliest general compilations of *ḥadīth* to achieve renown. All of its

2,767 texts were examined. In the interest of saving space I shall give the Arabic words and expressions only when it is deemed important to do so for the discussion, or in the case of unusual words. The texts may be classified according to three rhetorical types: declaratory, imperative, and narrative. We can say that each of these types represents a rhetorical formula (as distinguished from a structural or syntactical one) which distinguishes the traditions whose themes are expressed by it.

A.   The declaratory formula, as might be expected, is a simple affirmation, either literal or figurative. Here are some examples, showing the variety of ways in which this formula is used.

1.   Definitions or clarifications (in citing examples the introductory formula will be placed in brackets)

> [The father of Sulaymān ibn Burayda reported] that the Messenger of God gave permission to visit graves.[5] (807)

> [The Messenger of God said,] "The Night of the Divine Decree (Laylat al-Qadr) is the night of the twenty-fourth."[6] (2167)

> [The Messenger of God said,] "Wine comes from these two trees, the palm tree and the grape vine." (2569)

> [I heard the Messenger of God say, three days before his death,] "No one dies but that he has good thoughts about God." (1779)

2.   Negative statements, usually with the exceptive particles, *lā. . .illā*

> [The Prophet said,] "There is no protection except in God and in His Messenger." (1230)

3.   Comparative statements

> [The Prophet said,] "Prayer in this, my mosque, is better than a thousand prayers (or a hundred)[7] in another one, unless it be the Mosque of Al-Ḥarām."[8] (950)

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[5] The *ḥadīth* texts are numbered consecutively in al-Ṭayālisī.

[6] Of the month of Ramadan.

[7] A variant reading.

[8] In Jerusalem

4.   Superlative statements

[The Messenger of God said,] "The best medical treatment is cupping." (890)

5.   Conditional promises, with the condition expressed in a variety of ways

[The Prophet said,] "Whoever reads Yā Sīn[9] in a night, seeking the face of God, will have his sins forgiven." (2467)

6.   Prophecies, with several distinctive rhetorical devices

[I heard the Messenger of God saying,] "This religion will not cease to stand firm; Muslims will band together to fight for it until Judgment Day." (756)

7.   Epigrams

[The Messenger of God said,] "Paradise lies in the shadow of the swords." (530)

8.   Metaphorical assertions

[The Messenger of God said,] "The relationship between myself and the Prophets can be compared to a house which a man built carefully, but left one brick unlaid. Those who visited the house admired it, except for the empty space for the one brick. Then I laid the brick. I am the Seal of the Prophets." (1785)

[The Messenger of God said,] "The believer is to another believer like the parts of a building that support each other." (503)

9.   Rhymes

[When the Messenger of God drank he used to breathe three times and say,] "It is more healthful, more wholesome and more healing (*huwa ahna' wa-amra' wa-abra'*)." (2118)

10.   Numerical sayings, in which the items under consideration are coordinated into an easily remembered list. First there is a statement of

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[9] Sūra 36 of the Qur'ān.

what all of the items have in common, and then they are listed.

> [The Messenger of God said,] "A Muslim's claim from his brother is fivefold: returning the salutation, visiting the sick, following the bier, saying amen to the *imām* (prayer leader), and blessing (*tashmīt*) the one who sneezes." (2299)

> [The Messenger of God said,] "Seven will find God's protection in the day when there will be no protection except His: a just ruler or an upright leader, a young man who grows up worshipping God, a man whose heart is so directed toward the place of prayer that he returns to it, two men who meet together in the love of God and part in that same love, a man who gives alms in secret so that his left hand does not know what his right hand has done in secret, a man who, when a beautiful woman calls out to him, says, 'I fear God,' and a man who remembers God in solitude and whose eyes flow with tears from fear of God." (2462)

11.   Antithetical assertions, with two thoughts placed parallel to each other

> [The Messenger of God said,] "Those who drink wine in this world will not drink it in the hereafter, unless they repent." (1857)

> [The Prophet said,] "Whoever obeys my commander (*amīr*) obeys me, and whoever disobeys my commander disobeys me." (2432)

12.   Blessings

> [I heard the Messenger of God say,] "May God grant pardon to Ghifār and peace to Aslam." (1766)[10]

13.   Curses

> [I heard the Messenger of God say in a sermon,] "May God inflict with leprosy (or, with bankruptcy) those who monopolize the food market of the Muslims." (55)

Sometimes a composite form of several statements is found, including representative examples of any of the above types of affirmations. This combination of affirmations we call a discourse.

B.   The imperative formula consists of a statement in the imperative mood or else a statement conveying the thought of a command, an

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[10] In this text note the play on the names of the tribes: "Ghifār ghafara Allāh lahā wa Aslam sālamahā Allāh."

injunction, or a prescription.

1.   Injunctions

> [The Prophet said,] "Feed the hungry, relieve the distressed and visit the sick."
> (489)

> [The Messenger of God said to me,] "O Abū Dharr, when you fast three days in a
> month make them the thirteenth, the fourteenth, and the fifteenth days." (475)

2.   Judgments, which are moral or legal decisions and pronouncements, and
which convey a sense of obligation

> [The Prophet said,] "Neither a swindler nor a traitor will enter Paradise." (8)

> [I saw the Messenger of God] condemn an unmarried man who had committed
> fornication to a hundred lashes and banishment for a year. (1332)

3.   Prohibitions

> [Abū Hurayra said,] "The Messenger of God forbade the acquisition of slave
> girls." (2520)

> [The Messenger of God said,] "Do not set some of the Prophets of God above others."
> (2366)

> [The Messenger of God said,] "Neither the horse of a believer nor his slave can serve as
> legal alms (ṣadaqa)." (2527)

C.   The narrative formula accords with the emphasis that the *ḥadīth* place
upon the example of the Prophet for the life of the Muslim community. A vast
number of *ḥadīth* recount actions or recall events in the life of Muḥammad or
that of early Muslims which are significant in the sense either of being exemplary
for the believers, or of constituting elements in the collective recollection of the
community, serving to nourish its faith.
Examples of the narrative formula, in order of increasing complexity, are as
follows:

> [I heard ᶜAlī say] that every night the Messenger of God prayed (*awtara*) at the
> beginning of the night, in the middle of it and at the end of it, his prayer lasting
> until dawn. (115)

> [The Messenger of God was preaching and he saw my father in the sun.]

So he bade him, or signaled to him, to come into the shade. (1298)

[A man of the Anṣār said to the Prophet,] "You put so-and-so in a place of authority, but you did not do that for me." Then he replied, "After me you will see selfishness, but persevere until we meet together around the Basin (ḥawḍ)."[11] (1969)

[The Prophet said to him,] "O Abū Ayyūb, would you not like for me to indicate to you an alms which would bring pleasure to God and to His Messenger?" "Why yes," he said. So the Prophet said, "It is to reconcile people who are estranged and to bring together those who are separated." (598)

[The Messenger of God used to pray until his feet swelled. Someone said to him,] "O Messenger of God, why do you do that when all of your sins, both former and latter, have been forgiven?" The Messenger of God said, "Should I not be a grateful slave?" (693)

[I heard ᶜAlī telling (the following):] I presented the Messenger of God with a garment of silk, but he sent it back to me. Then I put it on, and he said to me, "What I despise for myself does not please me for you either." He bade me tear the garment into strips to serve as veils for the women. (119)

It might be asked why some examples of the narrative formula might not be included in the first category of declaratory sayings, or, for that matter, in the second, imperative group, since their main thrust consists precisely of concise and striking affirmations or imperatives. Nos. 598 and 1969 are examples which might elicit such a question. In their entirety however, they do not fit the description of a declaratory or an imperative formula, even though they contain an affirmation (1969) and a moral imperative (598). The narrator in those examples imbeds each saying in a conversational exchange, creating a rudimentary story. And, clearly, historical or biographical recollections, such as nos. 115 and 1298 above, are only to be considered as narrative formulas.

Conclusion

The formulaic approach to the *ḥadīth* literature permits us to ascertain the nature of the texts which transmit the traditions of the Prophet Muḥammad. This procedure sets the stage for a rhetorical analysis of the

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[11] Eschatological reality.

material.[12] A comparison of variant readings of the same tradition should cast light upon the way in which oral literature develops through its transmission from one generation to another. Fortunately, the *ḥadīth* collections provide abundant evidence of the way in which particular testimonies or recollections underwent interpolations, omissions, distortions, combinations, condensations, and augmentations as they were passed on from one link to another in the chains of transmission. And, finally, the structure and rhetoric of the *ḥadīth* are not to be considered as purely the anonymous productions of a community. They are, in the Muslim view, inseparably linked with some of the outstanding personalities of early Islamic history. Much skepticism has been expressed by non-Muslim scholars regarding the attribution of *ḥadīth* texts to particular individuals, and certainly a critical sense is needed in assessing the evidence for the authenticity of the chains of transmission. Such scholarly reserve should not, however, inhibit a thorough testing for correlations between the insight furnished by the biographies of the guarantors of *ḥadīth* and the subject matter and forms of expression seen in the material itself.

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[12] Rhetorical analysis of *ḥadīth* is one of my research projects. At the 1985 national meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature, I presented a paper entitled "Rhetorical Features of Pronouncement Stories in the *Ḥadīth* Literature of Islam."

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